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ABSTRACT

Few publications on interinstitutional cooperation go beyond a description, generally a glowing one, of individual programs and activities. Yet many problems beset an effort of formalized cooperation. (1) There is often a great difference between "cooperation" as an abstraction and "cooperation" as a practical reality. The mere formalization of a cooperative center does not lead automatically to cooperative behavior on the part of the participants. (2) For each consortium created, the primary orientation of faculty, administration, and students will remain toward the home institution. (3) Unrealistic expectations for the consortium often lead to frustration. (4) An early "search for identity" is common for most consortia, and actual programs may be slow to start. (5) It is difficult for a consortium to draw up rational long-range plans or suitable programs if its members are unwilling or unable to construct their own plans, or unwilling to share in the consortium plans. (6) Creating a consortium does not lead to automatic financial support. Recognizing their limitations, consortia should nevertheless seek institutional change, revitalization and administrative efficiency. (AF)

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Toward Realism in Initating Collegiate Cooperative Centers

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A short poem appeared recently which, I think, may be of some interest to those of you who are executive officers or staff members of consortia. I'd like to pass it on in the hope that you may find some basis to "identify" with it. It's entitled "Ode of the Engineer."

I'm not allowed to run the train
the whistle I can't blow --
I'm not allowed to say how far
the railroad cars can go,
I'm not allowed to pull the brake
or even clang the bell,
But let it jump the blasted track,
then see who catches hell!

The extent to which the dilemma of responsibility without control transfers to the everyday life of consortium staff members is probably far greater than many people not actually working within these groups realize. Few people not engaged in the process of interinstitutional cooperation recognize the limitations and constraints circumscribing the freedom with which any consortium can act. Certainly the minute albeit growing number of publications and speeches available on the general nature of interinstitutional cooperation have seldom gone beyond the mere description -- one is tempted to say the inflation -- of individual programs and activities. The presentation by Richard Lancaster was a notable exception. Other mediums have been no more accurate in their presentations. Hence, people entering this field cannot be criticized if they are unaware of the limitations placed on consortium personnel. You will all agree, I think, that the state of the information available in this area has been largely lacking in either realistic evaluations of the actual impact particular efforts have had, or in portraying the problems these ventures dealt with and overcame before their success was apparent. The situation commonly approximates that described by Abraham Lincoln in another realm. The writers and speakers are not being untruthful, but rather, he said, "They have such great regard for the truth that they spend most of their time embellishing it."

In general, those who are most actively engaged in this sector of academia have found it both fruitful and politic to reserve close examination of their most pressing problems and difficulties to informal and (to others) invisible discussions. Those problems which have surfaced provide outsiders with only small clues regarding many serious and basic problems which remain unsolved and several paradoxes which are not likely to ever be solved with any sense of finality. Anyone who has even fleeting experiences with cooperative ventures, however simple they may be, cannot long remain insensitive to the myriad sources of tension that can lead to frustration and failure. Assuming that both the quantitative and qualitative growth in intercollegiate cooperative centers continues, it becomes incumbent upon all of us to examine and communicate our failures as well as our successes more systematically, and with more candor than has been true in the past. Because there are some problems and limitations common to all cooperative organizations, they should be continually pointed out to others so

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that institutional personnel forming consortia can deal with these organizations in more appropriate, understanding and sophisticated fashion. It would be well for us all, in fact, if our boards and our faculties were better educated about the problems which pervade nearly all consortia, regardless of who the executive officer is, or which institutions are involved. Toward this end, I would like to isolate what appear to me to be the most frequent, although by no means universal, aspects of a misconception deserving of an accurate interpretation.

This misconception is the inaccurate image that is often carried around regarding the difference between cooperation as an abstraction and cooperation as a practical reality. Too often the term cooperation conjures up pristine and wholly misconstrued notions of what the process of cooperation entails. All too frequently it has been believed, perhaps because we wished it to be so believed, that the mere formalization of a cooperative center leads almost automatically to the creation of relationships between institutions that are ipso facto effective, efficient, innovative and above all eminently and imminently fundable. Stated so badly, this notion would, I am sure attract few advocates. The appearance of this image is more likely to show itself in actions which speak for themselves in subtle ways. We are all too poignantly aware that a good deal of deliberate and concentrated effort must be expended before any cooperative programs can begin to lead to significant spin-offs. Yet to read our annual reports, project summaries and newsletters, or to listen to our conference speeches, one could hardly escape believing that every frog that's ever been kissed has turned into a prince. Similarly, the massive inventories of dubiously labeled "potential programs" which are attendant to the formation of nearly every consortium create an awesome, yet largely fanciful over-expectation of what a new consortium will accomplish in one, five, and in some situations possibly even a dozen years. Those of you who have read The Peter Principle may recognize the presence of Peter's Placebo which argues that an ounce of image is worth a pound of performance. Of course, people developing an organization of this type must be optimistic about the possibilities open to them. At the same time, however, the first executive officer faces a task of herculean proportions if the initiators and their staffs are insufficiently aware of the obstacles unavoidably present. The initiations of some new executive officers have been unnecessarily traumatic because they have been unprepared for the manifold difficulties likely to devastate many of their initial goals and plans.

I might mention that institutional and consortium personnel are not the only ones who have ever acquired an excessively illusory concept of cooperation. Officers associated with funding agencies may also be misled by our ideology to adopt unrealistic perceptions of how quickly the objectives they are seeking can be reached through consortia. A short while ago, one officer who had funded several cooperative programs commented to me that he was disappointed over the discrepancy between their actual operation and his own expectation of how they should function. "Those people", he noted, "don't really know what a consortium is. They haven't begun to pool and share institutional resources!" How many people here would like to have their programs at the receiving end of that lone criterion? Too often repeated, it could be that our clichés may return to haunt us.

The remedy for repairing this type of situation is more easily called for than accomplished, and it may well be that a precise understanding of cooperative program administration will not come without actually participating in these activities. Nonetheless it should be our collective task to make it clear that simply creating a one man organization does not usher in an academic Age of Acquarius in which the subscribing institutions are henceforth to be miraculously embued with harmony and under-

standing, sympathy and trust abounding. To return to the initial problem, cooperative actions should not be pictured solely as unblemished and easily achieved successes. Although there are numerous advances for which consortia can take some credit, onlookers should be cautioned that joint programs are seldom born easily and do not just fall into place on their own accord.

To a large degree the application of the term interinstitutional "cooperation" may itself be a misnomer, if one presumes that the term means institutional personnel must harbor feelings altruistic and selfless disconcern for their own college's welfare. The historical insularity of institutions of higher education and their deliberately distinctive nature deters such a phenomenon in most collectivities, regardless of how rational and welcome such a development might at times appear to be. Self sufficiency has been the watchword for too long a time to be abondoned rapidly. It would be far more accurate and useful to assume that cooperation parallels a dictum in political science and should be thought of as competition by other means. A change in this posture, if it comes at all, will be accepted only with substantial amounts of both self-righteous foot dragging and quite proper protest. We can and should expect that for each consortium created, the primary orientation of the faculty and administrators, and the students as well, will remain institutionally introspective. Cooperation is likely to continue to be pictured as something the other fellows will do when they come around to one's own way of thinking. I would like to argue that institutional personnel creating consortia are expecting the impossible, not the inevitable, if they assume that the situation will be otherwise. Even in situations where logic would recommend a dissolution of institutional boundaries it is likely to be as Jose Ortega y Gasset put it in another context,

> "Men prefer service, without real allegiance, under outworn banners, to compliance with the painful effort of revising inherited principles and setting them in accord with their deepest feelings."

Beyond the failure to recognize that the institutions in a consortium are likely to cherish and maintain their autonomy and institutional integrity, a more serious mistake often is made when it is assumed that goals for a consortium can be easily identified and quickly translated into operational programs. A superficial survey of cooperative activities in operation across the nation can easily lead the initiators of a consortium to make the unwarranted assumption that they can adopt the same projects on a wholesale basis. Each of the individuals involved may accept the value of existing programs without realizing that an intricate constellation of closely inter-related, and for them, possibly intractable factors are basic for successful transplantation of the idea to their own consortium. It may not be until well after a cooperative center is formed, that it becomes apparent that within the consortium the only mutually agreed upon commitment was to form the center. This does not seem to be unusual. Lacking judicious measures of realism, groups of colleges and universities forming consortia may, however, experience undue dissatisfaction when many of the ideas for projects proposed are discarded and progress is slower than anticipated. The resultant dissipation of the mirage of unlimited potential is bound to leave a residue of dissatisfaction. When this is the case, it would take founding fathers of unusual insight to admit that their consortium may have failed to recognize the difference between reciting what others were doing, and citing what they themselves were going to pledge their energies toward creating and implementing. After viewing and attempting to emulate nationally outstanding consortia whose activities may either be wholly inappropriate or too far in advance of their own center's potential, initiators can find themselves agreeing with the sentiments expressed by the fair Rosalind of Shakespeare's

As You Like It. "To have seen much and to have nothing is to have rich eyes and poor hands." This combination can lead to a rapid disenchantment with cooperation generally.

As a consequence, initiators of a center may be susceptible to the grass-is-greener syndrome and erroneously assume that clarity of vision and long-term perspectives are more prevalent among other consortia than is true of their own. It would surely be easy to build a logically neat case for clarifying the exact objectives a center is meant to achieve before it is actually operational or at least shortly after it is formed. To do so, however, would severely misrepresent what has actually happened at existing consortia. In a survey I conducted last summer, more than eighty percent of the consortia reporting were found to have been formed without having developed concise plans for administering the programs they eventually undertook. The percentage might easily have been higher were it not for the incentives provided through funding sources that required concrete program designs before a grant was awarded. Thus, an early "search for identity," if you will, is quite common among new consortia and is probably equally important for older groups as well. Pressing the notion that long-range and intermediate goals and short-term objectives must be spelled out far in advance would be likely to have nearly every executive officer here shifting in his seat. The discomfiture is likely to be far more acute if the board of trustees of a new consortium has been led to believe that the establishment of a central office leads to a rapid emergence of such goals. While there are a handful of instances in which the desirability of forming a centrally staffed consortium grew out of an attempt to rationalize and extend existing cooperative arrangements, most cooperative centers have been and will be created first, and asked to justify themselves and their activities afterwards. Within this climate a seldom stated, but none-the-less necessary function of an executive director will be simply continuing to maintain and revitalize interest in joint actions. The half-life of the cooperative spirit is all too short to rest upon actual achievements by a consortium, much less upon the initial, intangible statements of institutional intent which may loudly profess, but which may not readily procure the support and assistance requisite to developing a clearly delineated set of long-term goals. Rather than solely implementing cooperative programs, persons engaged to head up a consortium should expect to find themselves utilizing sizable periods of time and energy identifying concrete and tangible goals that can, in fact, be attained. Some solace may be taken by them in knowing that the executive officer's anxiety over what it is he should be doing will be matched by an even greater uncertainty on the part of personnel representing the institutions which formed the organization. If a handbook on cooperation is eventually written, it might well start with the observation, "In the beginning was the word...that was all, just the word."

One factor which may prohibit the synthesis of long-term goal hierarchies is the implicit, but unrecognized role the consortium is forced to assume because of the actions of its member institutions. It is difficult, for instance, to forsee a cooperative center being able to develop either rational long-range plans or suitable programs if its members are unable or unwilling to construct their own plans, or if they are unwilling to share those plans which are being created. Lacking the basic information needed to structure a fruitful planning program, some consortia, new and old, are likely to be adhesive in nature rather than cohesive. That is, they are probably destined to maintain an orientation toward temporary projects which are largely unrelated to one another and which are based more upon the priorities of funding agencies than they are on institutional concerns. The failure of subscribing institutions to contribute or assist in acquiring the basic academic information and support needed to develop coherent plans can force any cooperative center to become isolated

from the life of the campuses, and thought of as an optional service organization which can be disregarded or ignored at will and perhaps even abused with impunity. While it would be presumptuous for anyone to suppose that each institution should consider cooperation as its number one priority, it would be extremely unrealistic of institutional personnel to expect a consortium's future and its raison d' etre to emerge in clear functional terms when their own actions are based upon a "when all else fails, try cooperation" attitude. Many authors have written about what might be termed a "natural coherence" in consortia. I doubt that such a trait has ever existed. Coherence is invented and gradually reinforced, rather than located and institutionalized. It may be trite to make the observation but consortia, like great athletes, are made not born. Unless an effective desire to continue providing the data needed for seeking a cooperative course of action is present, the planning effort cannot go far, the availability of facilitative factors such as geographic proximity, institutional similarity or incentive grants notwithstanding. Cooperation is not that easy. Bunnell and Johnson cogently noted that obtaining a consensus is a difficult matter.

> Arriving at a consensus is sometimes delicate and often cumbersome. In case agreement is not apparent, or if disagreement is clear, there is no alternative to time-consuming polling, conferring, weighing of suggestions, repolling on revisions, and finally explaining the composite of all to the satisfaction of each.

Even this brief glimpse is understated and assumes that a composite satisfactory to each is possible.

Not too far from the surface gliding the formation of a few consortia is the impatient and somewhat naive supposition that the establishment of a cooperative center is equivalent to a direct line to Fort Knox. Despite ostentatious and frequent denials, a deceptive syllogism embeds itself that can become difficult to remove. With variations it goes something like this:

1. Consortia are effective vehicles for obtaining financial support from external agencies.

2. We are forming a consortium.

3. (Need I say it) Therefore, we too have an effective vehicle for obtaining financial support from external agencies.

A logician would agree that the reasoning crystallized here may be quite proper and valid, yet he would quickly point out that a valid conclusion is not necessarily true. So it seems to be here. One year ago, at this same forum, Bill Adrian aptly categorized ventures founded on these bases as "paper consortia" which were unlikely to withstand close scrutiny by any funding office. The tragedy of the collapse of this reasoning is not that such ventures fail, but that there will be some individuals (including executive officers) and institutions which invest their time, integrity and resources with laudatory intentions in a fruitless venture that stifles substantive contributions they might have made in a different setting. An instructive parallel may have been shown to us in the not too distant past. When the first mutual funds demonstrated remarkable successes in the stock market, the number of these groups proliferated.

Many of the would-be "go-go" funds discovered that there was a distinct and harsh limitation on the numbers of fast-rising, high profit stocks available. Those stocks were unable to supply the same potential for growth for the sharply expanded set of demands and expectations. The cause for the failure of those funds to attain the desired rates of return is no more obscure than the shrinking sources of support open to higher education generally, and to consortia in particular. It may well be that for the immediate future the potential resources available to joint efforts, likewise, cannot provide the sustenance needed to support the combined legitimate requests of all cooperative centers. The presently stringent financial environment more than any other factor will expose unfounded notions that the cooperative approach is the easiest path to supplementary funding. There are already indications that some of the consortia born in recent years amidst flourishes of optimism and utopian expectations may find their progress stunted in the throes of unexpected, but predictable difficulties.

Lest my remarks this evening be taken as being excessively pessimistic or cynical it would be well for me to emphasize my personal belief that cooperative organizations have been and will, no doubt, continue to contribute greatly to the resolution of some of the most pressing concerns confronting institutions of higher education. Over the past several months while developing an inventory of all cooperative arrangements among colleges and universities in New York State, I had the opportunity to contrast my findings with those obtained by Merton Ertell during a similar study in 1957. The most significant point of change in the time period separating our respective studies was the increased formalization of cooperative efforts, particularly, but not solely, as organized through collegiate cooperative centers. The creation of six such organizations in New York State when there were nine in 1957 is important because, by and large, their existence is evidence of a voluntary effort on the part of their member institutions to provide the initial financial and academic support needed to develop cooperation where there was little or none before. This trend assumes that a willingness to seek additional areas for cooperation is now present and will continue to remain in effect. The prospects for increasing the combined impact of these groups is based on a recognition that such organizations can, in fact, succeed with measurable results. In turn, this is so because for these centers cooperation is a full-time activity, to which the central staff can bring the required time and expertise to cooperative projects. Consortia are able to regularize, coordinate and monitor all of the cooperative activities they sponsor and, more importantly, they are capable of securing and maintaining a climate conducive to cooperation by limiting and overcoming unnecessary and dysfunctional conflicts. Continuity between and within the programs coordinated by cooperative centers is greatly facilitated by the ability of consortia to maintain regular channels of communication and to stimulate the emergence of recurring patterns of inter-action between their member colleges. Thus, consortia have characteristics which enable them to act as appropriate vehicles for dealing with many problems that are attendant to joint program development at a less formal level. As instruments for achieving goals which individual institutions could not have attained, I am sure that consortia deserve more recognition for the contributions they have made than they have thus far received. Individuals establishing and working through these organizations must be restrained, from making the easy transition from believing that since a problem cannot be handled individually the problem, therefore, can be solved collectively. There are many critical concerns that will probably never be amenable to cooperative effort, no matter how valiantly executed. To take an obvious example, few if any dying institutions will be saved by cooperation. Consortia do not now have the resources, staff or capacity to avert a problem of this magnitude.

Recognizing the limitations of consortia should not prevent such ambitious goals as institutional change, revitalization, or administrative efficiency from being sought. Rather accepting these limitations should lead one to temper his expectations with the succinct advice given by Piet Hein. "Problems worthy of attack, prove their worth by hitting back." The ability to absorb the counter-attack of the problems dealt with will be the hallmark of those consortia which are able to go beyond merely surviving and following the leadership of others. Only those cooperative centers which are able to overcome the inevitable obstacles that accompany any significant undertaking are likely to expand and prosper. Hopefully, new cooperative centers being organized will be able to avoid the loss of time and good will by launching brief, unrealistic sorties into areas that would frighten Don Quixote. It would seem that unless an accurate understanding of cooperative project organization and administration is present, no consortium can take that quantum jump to a level of vitality in which cooperation is maturely treated as an imperfect, limited conflictual baseline from which one begins, rather than as an abstract and unattainable objective which is still to be achieved.